

# A Mosaic of Glimpses of Satyajit Ray

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## Abstract

Revisiting the world of Satyajit Ray twenty five years after he passed away in 1992 gives us the perspective to see more clearly that he was not just for cinema but one of the world's all time greatest artist. Would his films still rekindle old passions? How relevant are they in the postmodern society? In his films he has always focused on social issues and emphasized the importance of placing the 'have nots' at the centre of concern. Thirty-seven years of his work is a chronicle of social transformation, it is a journey through a century of social change in India. Even as it records this transformation, yet the core message to humanity seems just as relevant now as it was then.

Ray's material is Indian but his statements are about humanity. He sees the oneness of all human beings, he looks at them as people caught in the meshes of time and place. Perhaps it is in this that the rest of the world feels an affinity with him and finds in the serenity of his faith a uniqueness that transcends national boundaries. Ray's early films are buoyed up by an affirmation of faith in the human being. There are hardly any villains in these films. The oppressor and the oppressed are both victims. After several masterpieces, Ray's spiritual exhaustion is evident in his later works, they lack the aesthetic vigour and visual language of his earlier films.

Ray is often criticized for glorifying poverty and romanticizing the third world culture. Ritwik Ghatak was often critical of the disinfected realism of Ray's films. Yet for all his shortcomings his films have a ring of truth, and are seamless narratives which offer a wealth of psychological insight. The humanism, universality, deceptive simplicity and underlying complexity evident make his works contemporary, easily transcending barriers of time and space.

## Keywords

Apu Trilogy, Humanism, Transformative Power, Bengali Culture

*"To see PatherPanchali again today, half a century after it was made, is to go down on ones knees in the dust, into the heart of Indian reality, and the human condition."* Lindsay Anderson (Dasgupta, 2001, p.1X)

In the grinding poverty of the Indian village, *Pather Panchali* focuses not on the larger picture, but zooms into the individual human being, unique as much in his joy in love and nature and childhood, as in the tragic sorrow of death and in the endless daily struggle to live. It is the human face of rural poverty and not the statistical numbers that makes us see

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Apu or Durga, Sarbajaya or Harihar, as one of us. They become a part of us and change us inexplicably and mould our view of humanity (Dasgupta, 2001).

Revisiting the world of Satyajit Ray twenty four years after he passed away in 1992 gives us the perspective to see more clearly that he was not just for cinema but one of the world's all time greatest artist. Would his films still rekindle old passions? How relevant are they in the post modern society? Ray is among a select group of sixteen global icons who have been recognized by the United Nations recently for their contribution to the common good of mankind. In his films he has always focused on social issues and emphasized the importance of placing the 'have nots' at the centre of our concern. His films are a brilliant blend of intellect and emotion. Not to have seen the cinema of Satyajit Ray means existing in the world without seeing the sun and the moon. These words of Akira Kurosawa aptly sums up this illustrious filmmaker. He remains an important icon of aesthetic Indian cinema and the alternate school of filmmaking.

Thirty seven years of his work is a chronicle of social transformation in an era, it is a journey through a century of social change in India. From the final eclipse of Mughal glory in *Shatranj ke khilari* to the decay of the feudal zamindar in *Jalsaghar*, the impoverished Brahmin's movement from traditional to modern India in the Apu trilogy, the Indian elite's awakening to rationalist ideas in *Devi* and *Charulata*, the beginning of the liberation of woman in *Mahanagar*, to the anguish of the unemployed after decades of the country's independence in *Pratidwandi*, the slow death of conscience in a corrupt society in *Jana Aranya* and finally the glimmer of hope in a new agenda of a simplification of human needs and a reassertion of basic values in *Agantuk*- Ray's work traces the essential outline of social evolution of the middle class in modern India (Dasgupta, 2001). Even as it records the transformation from a bygone era to the modern times, yet the core message to humanity seems just as relevant now as it was then.

Some opine that the response of the Western world to Ray is more complete, like seeing the woods where the Indian sees only the trees. Ray's material is Indian but his statements are about humanity. He sees the oneness of all human beings, he looks at them as people caught in the meshes of time and place. Perhaps it is in this that the rest of the world feels an affinity with him and finds in the serenity of his faith a uniqueness that distinguishes it from the restless search of a Bergman or a Fellini. His work transcends national boundaries and takes away from us the right to be his final judges merely because we are his countrymen. Yet his films abound in visualizations of Bengali culture. The Western influence on Ray's work cannot be ignored (Cooper, 2000). Robinson (1989) notes that justice cannot be done to Ray without an understanding of world cinema of all kinds, western and Indian classical music, as well as an informed appreciation of the language, literature, music, religions and history of Bengal.

A purely 'aesthetic' appreciation of Ray's work can hardly be a complete one. Ray was a classicist, an inheritor of a traditional Indian approach to art in which beauty is inseparable from truth and goodness. Ray's early films are buoyed up by an affirmation of faith in the human being. There are hardly any villains in these films. The oppressor and the oppressed are both victims.

Ray's lack of anger, his distance from the event, his avoidance of overt, direct action, did not always endear him to the younger generations, particularly in his later years. Some sought alternative models in Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen. Indeed Ray's work entered an indeterminate watershed after the peak of *Charulata*. The changed conditions of the country, the waning of the euphoric visions, mounting evidence of the privileged class running away with the fruits of development, brought about a subtle change in the temper of

Ray's work. The Calcutta of the vast political meetings and lengthening queues, notably absent from his films of the first decade, began to make its presence felt, bringing a new nervous edge to his classicism. *Pratidwandi* abounds in the negative images, shots of the unemployed exploding in anger; in *Jana Aranya* for the first time Ray gets down to the seamy side of Calcutta, its grimy alleys leading to the brittle 'shiny fronts of call girl haunts'. But even in Ray's second decade where the recognition of decay is increasingly marked, the pessimism recognizes the compulsions under which compromises with evil are made. The face of evil is somewhat averted and we do not make a direct confrontation with it. The ambitious executive of *Seemabaddha* continues to need the esteem of his critical sister in law. The PRO of *Jana Aranya*, who procures a girl the young businessman needs for his client, is redeemed by his good humour and a certain clinical detachment from the evil goings on (Dasgupta, 2001).

Perhaps it is from *Sadgati* or *Ghaire Bhaire* that we see a new inclination to point a finger at the villain. Pauline Kael (1965) compares these villains to a corrupted Apu; intellectuals, introverts and sentimental (Kael, 1965)

*Pather Panchali* marked the baptism of Indian cinema in both its cinematic language and its Indianness. The Apu trilogy consists of *Pather Panchali*, *Aparijito* and *Apur sansar*. It tells the story of a boy Apu, his wife, father, sister in their village amidst poverty in *Pather Panchali*. Next in *Aparijito*, Apu and his parents leave for Benares in search of better prospects, later his mother and father pass away in different incidents. *Aparijito* is an ode to adolescence which captures the nuances of the mother-son relationship most poignantly. One can feel the distance creeping between Apu and his mother as he grows from childhood to adolescence, as they are slowly but inescapably moving into different worlds (Chatterjee, 2009). The last film, *Apur sansar* is considered to be the most well crafted of the three. Here Ray adopts a different approach, he is not stereotyped as a neorealist chronicler of poverty. He delves into the lives of the urban middle class. Apu lives at a shed in the railway station. He goes to college, marries Aparna. When she dies in childbirth, he is shattered and renounces everything. However he comes back after a few years to take care of his son. Many foreign critics (Wood, 1972) did not quite understand why Apu in *Apur sansar* should marry Aparna when her husband to be is found insane, or why bought up in affluence, she should so readily accept the penury of life with her husband. This lack of understanding perhaps comes from a lack of knowledge of the prevailing socio religious customs of those times.

The Apu trilogy is perhaps structurally Ray's most Indian film, free flowing in its form, more spontaneous. Some of it certainly comes from his writer, Bibhuti Bandyopadhyay's spiritual quality. Both the novelist and the filmmaker are 'humanists' who believe in certain eternal traits of human nature every where and in every age. Such a proposition should have seemed devoid of meaning in the modern, not to speak of the postmodern world. Curiously it does not. It seems to grip people of all ideologies practically everywhere in the world. It seems to do the impossible by capturing something elemental in human society. In Ray's words "The novel, *Pather panchali* was a sprawling saga whose leisurely episodic unfolding perfectly caught the rhythm and pace of life in a Bengal village. In adapting it I tried to combine the relaxed quality of the original with a tightness called for by the exigencies of the conventional feature film". Ray subtly manages to remove the *Sonar Bangla* (golden Bengal) sheen from Bibhuti bhushan's closely observed reality making it grimmer, more contemporary, yet retaining something of the purity of vision of the original. Ray's progression from his village to Benares and to Calcutta becomes more of a chronicle of social change in the films than in the novel, brought about by the railways and the globe. It is the inevitable movement of one era into another like many others before it and many others to come. Hence there are no heroes and villains, only human beings, everyone with a reason for being what he is (Dasgupta, 2001).

Structurally *Aparajito* is meaningful mainly as a bridge between Pather panchali and Apur sansar. Within itself it is not sufficiently balanced. Benares comes to life but Calcutta does not. The most significant chapter is the relationship between an adolescent son drawn to the outside world and a mother seeing him unchanged from his boyhood. Apu's release is perhaps more important than the poignancy of his mother's death (Chatterjee, 2009).

Apur sansar is Ray's most personal film in the nature of the emotional charge it carries within. It is suffused with warmth and compassion.

### **A Kaleidoscope of Images: Critical Appraisal**

Ray was a perfectionist with an ability to depict a whole culture with all the nuances, an ability to portray the social scene and build an authentic atmosphere for bygone days, for a large span of time ranging up to one hundred and fifty years. His films were set in a different periods of history; for instance *Devi* was set in 1830's but made in 1960; *Charulata* was set in 1870's yet made in 1964; *Shatranj ke khiladi* set in 1850's but made in 1977. But he had the ability to take the viewer seamlessly into that era. It is interesting to note that although he was meticulous about accuracy of period details yet he chose to dress women in clothing that belonged to a later period. Many of his female protagonists wore saree with a blouse, but socio religious practices did not allow Hindu women to use stitched clothes during that time period. The blouse was introduced to the Bengali women in 1890's by Gnanadanandini Devi, wife of Satyendranath Tagore, eldest brother of Rabindranath Tagore. Perhaps Ray did not want to bring out the sexuality of the protagonists too stridently with bare arms and shoulders (Dasgupta, 2001).

Ray is often criticized for glorifying poverty and romanticizing the third world culture. Many commented on his exporting poverty even as he does not offer solutions to conflicts. Ritwik Ghatak was often critical of the disinfected realism of Ray's films. After several masterpieces Ray's creative exhaustion can be seen in his later works. *Nayak*, *Seemabandha*, *Pratidwandi* lack the aesthetic vigour and visual grammar of his earlier films. Most of them were shot indoors and contained too many dialogues. Perhaps his poor health was also a contributing factor (Nyce, 1988).

Yet for all his shortcomings his films have a ring of truth, and are seamless narratives which offer a wealth of psychological insight. The humanism, universality, deceptive simplicity and underlying complexity evident in his works endear him to all, ranging from film critics to the common man, simply because there is something appealing for everyone. All his works are contemporary and universal, easily transcending barriers of time and space.

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